WORK FOR THE BLIND
IN CONNECTICUT

Rev. George M. Stone

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WORK FOR THE BLIND IN CONNECTICUT.

BY REV. GEORGE M. STONE.

THE beginning of systematic care for the blind in our state was as humble, as it was honorable to the best impulses of the human heart. No committee met to devise relief for the unfortunate. No definite plan was formulated in their behalf. A single soul was touched by a single sorrow and disability, and moved to its practical relief. This was the little rill now broadening into a river whose steady current, it is to be hoped may carry blessing to a great number of these children of need. In the history of the blind in Connecticut the story of a little Italian boy deaf to the English language handicapped in body, besides his blindness will be ever a notable one. He made his mute appeal to a Hartford lady, who found him in one of the purlieus of the lower part of the city. What could be done for him? Again, the will found a way. He was taken to her pleasant home by his kind patron, Mrs. Emily Wells Foster, and there little by little a new world opened upon his darkened spirit. Kindness could open the

THE FIRST NURSERY CHILDREN.

THE SAME CHILDREN FIVE YEARS LATER.

inner eye while the outer was sealed to the verdant fields, and the human face divine. He woke up to a sense of happiness in these new surroundings, joy touched and enlarged his boyish heart. The response elicited from this neglected child, was in the nature of a revelation to his friend, while the satisfaction it gave her own spirit, became an incentive to new endeavors in the same direction. Were there not others who might be lifted out of the shadows? Patient inquiry impelled by loving solicitude soon brought knowledge of various cases in different portions of the state. In October 1893, a small house on Kenyon street was engaged, and a shelter thus provided for blind children, especially for the children of the poor and neglected. Some of the children gathered here were very attractive despite their infirmity. There were sweet voices for speech and song among them. In some cases children were with difficulty rescued from bad surroundings. But difficulties vanished before resolution reenforced by sympathy, and so from time to time the enterprise enlarged in what might seem a purely natural way.

Waifs were drawn toward the temporary home from all quarters, and an interest in the blind was enkindled throughout the state. The children thus drawn together found a new life in social contact, and the softening and elevating influence of music added greatly to their sources of enjoyment. A little boy from Meriden who came in later days was unable to stand alone. At seven years of age, the muscles from disease had become weak and useless. In fact the little fellow's life had been chiefly spent in bed. His mother, a working woman had no skill to care for the development of the blind child. The pale, unintelligent child was taken in charge immediately by Miss Hurford, the tactful matron of the children, and in three months he could walk about the house and enter heartily

NURSERY AND KINDERGARTEN DEPARTMENT.
(Connecticut Institute for the Blind.)

into kindergarten games. No wonder when he waked in the night he used to sing " Ring, ring happy bells ! "

After this boy had been taught to walk, his father called at the Nursery to see him. Appearing to one of the teachers he inquired in broken English for "his little blind and crippled boy." "Oh !" said the teacher,"you have no crippled boy any more." When the little fellow appeared and was recognized, the father was overcome with emotion as he embraced the child who appeared to him at least half transformed.

Musical instruction has been given from the start, and has proved a most valuable aid in raising hope and inspiring mental aspiration in the children. Mr. Marshall, himself blind, but a graduate of the Perkins Institute of Boston, has been the indefatigable and successful teacher of these rescued sufferers. Any one who has heard the rehearsals of his children's orchestra, and marked the proficiency of his pupils from year to year, will need no other evidence of his skill and perseverance. In October, 1894, the growing wants of the movement required enlarged accommodations and the group of children and teachers were moved to more eligible quarters in the double three-story house at 1207 Asylum Avenue. Meanwhile friends were secured both among the seeing and the blind, who gave encouragement to the plan of ameliorating the condition of the blind wherever found in the state. A notable figure among these was F. E. Cleaveland, Esq., a blind attorney in the city of Hartford. Few tongues have been more eloquent in pleading for the rights of the blind than that of this energetic and well informed lawyer. Thoroughly familiar with the literature of the achievements of his class, and himself a fine instance of what they may do in a difficult field, his carefully prepared addresses carry conviction wherever they are heard. He pleads for no infantile legislation on behalf of the blind. He asks only for a fair opportunity for them with simply a

THE CHILDRENS ORCHESTRA.

just recognition of their disability. One is startled, who hears for the first time his assertions of their capacity even when handicapped by loss of sight. Hear his well chosen words in the following appeal:

"Your reason is like a king who in his palace sits enthroned. Your sense of sight is but one of five grand avenues of approach along which swift-footed messengers bring tidings of what transpires throughout your kingdom. You lose this sense of sight and you have but closed the palace gates of *one* of these grand avenues. But the messengers who are thus debarred, are only hindered, not dismayed. For quickly they approach the throne along the other four. Before you lost your sight you thought that little more could be accomplished for the blind than to provide them food, raiment and shelter, but now, with plenty of time to think it over and revise your former opinion, shall you feel compelled to resign the office you now hold and live in idle dependence on your fortune or friends, or perchance, if your fortune and friends should be swept away, will you be content to take a place in some neglected corner of a town poor-house? Or will you say in your mind, what blind men have accomplished may be again accomplished by the blind? Remembering Mr. Fawcett, who was chosen by Gladstone as a Cabinet Minister, would you not say if it was possible for him to make an eminently successful Postmaster-General of a great empire, will it not be possible for me to retain the office I now hold, and still find a way in which I can faithfully discharge my duty as a public servant?

Would you think it possible for a blind man to use the eyes of others as men use spectacles, and become one of the most celebrated naturalists of this day? Turn to your encyclopedia and read the life of Huber who is still the leading authority on the particular lines he followed out."

Mr. Cleaveland has stoutly and persistently claimed from the beginning; First, that *blindness itself* is not an impassable barrier preventing a person with this limitation from becoming a self-reliant, self-sustaining and useful member of society. Second, that the only reason why all blind people who are otherwise mentally and physically sound, do not become self-sustaining, is not because they are *blind*, but because the general belief entertained by all their seeing friends, (including their parents,) has in the case of children, robbed them of that training and discipline essential to a successful career even on the part of those who can see, and in the case of the adult blind operating to confirm *them* in the belief that they are rendered helpless by the loss of sight. These assertions do not however hang in the air. Witnesses are not wanting to their truthfulness, in measure, at least, who have watched for a few years past the progress of the children gathered in the Asylum Avenue home. Two years have sufficed in some instances to inscribe new signs of intelligence and happiness over these young faces. It is of course true of the blind as of the seeing, that differences in original capacity and native energy, manifest themselves in different degrees of progress, under a course of education. There is an able physician in Hartford, who in a condition of nearly total blindness meets with efficiency a variety of engagements. This is partly due to an element of courage and resolution, the absence of which in another case of similar misfortune would result in folding of the hands, and retiring from an active life. There is however an influence very radical in its character, upon blind pupils as upon all others, from the healthful rivalry of social training. Beyond this the blind from the natural aversion to activity produced by their condition are greatly in need of regular physical training. Without external help they become very shy of exercise.

The report of the Assistant Secretary of the Board of Education for the Blind for the year ending September, 1897, says:

"Physical training is of the utmost importance also; it strengthens and straightens forms, and encourages active and free movement. Few of our children have ever had any free exercise before coming to us, and strong bodies will strengthen minds, we know.

here. Gymnastic drills, timed by chime-bells, are of great benefit, too. Musical dumb-bells enable us to do much work in classes which, without the aid of sound, would have to be taught individually. Sloyd Knitting is also a factor in both mental and manual training."

Our feet are free to come and go,
While theirs are *chained* with doubt and fear.

"The loss of sight hampers them in walking. Running is almost an unknown power unless urged upon them. Physical inactivity can but result in impaired health; so, generally speaking, our work is begun

One of the marvels disclosed to our home constituency in connection with this work has been the deftness and facility of the blind in industrial work. Experts who have thoroughly studied the capacities of the blind in this direction had made what seemed to outsiders extrav-

agant claims in their behalf as industrial workers. It became necessary to meet doubters with practical demonstrations. The report for the year 1896 gives the details of an industrial enterprise in behalf of the blind.

"For the use of the industrial department, the Trustees purchased of the School Fund a lot of land 108 feet front by 900 feet in depth, situated on the east side of Wethersfield avenue, Hartford, two miles south of the City Hall. On this has been erected a three-story brick building with an eight foot basement, sixty by fifty-five feet, a frame work-shop twenty by forty feet, occupied as a mattress factory, carriage house, barn, and other minor improvements. The main building on Wethersfield avenue, used by the industrial department is occupied as follows: The first floor of the north half for a store, where general merchandise is kept; this store is in charge of and managed by blind people, under the inspection of the book-keeper of the Institution, whose office is in the store. The store serves as a medium through which the supplies are purchased for the Institution at first cost, and being located in the suburbs, is patronized by the citizens of the vicinity, and furnishes also

KINDERGARTEN CLASS.

an opportunity for certain of our pupils to acquire knowledge of a business in which many blind people have been successful. The south half of the first floor is equipped for and used as a job printing office; the second floor is occupied as kitchen, dining room, reception and music rooms and the third floor as a dormitory. Some of our pupils, matron, teachers and other help are obliged to find quarters outside of the Institution."

ZOOLOGY.

The work of the blind, along certain industrial lines has passed the experimental stage. The question no longer is, what can the blind do, but what have they done? There are four blind pupils who have been taught to feed the smaller printing presses. One feeds a cylinder press.

They do creditable work such as to justify the claim that a printing office is one of the places, where a blind person can make himself useful and in some cases at least earn a livelihood. Blind pupils operate the wire-stitching machines and do many other things which a few years since it would have been thought impossible for them to do. Who can estimate the satisfaction to themselves, of these workers as they thus become aware of capacities latent until they were helped to discover them and taught to give them practical expression! If the man who makes a tree grow where none grew before merits gratitude, what shall we say of one who releases a soul from its incapacity and leads it into a new world

SLOYD KNITTING.

of helpful and joyful activity! Out of these new experiences comes self-respect, increased sense of personal worth, and a lessening estimate of their disabilities to the blind.

The state of Connecticut became a factor in this work in the year 1893.

KINDERGARTEN WORK.

The movement had assumed such proportions, by reason of the number of blind children found in various parts of the state needing aid, that it seemed legitimate to make an appeal to the commonwealth to share in the necessary expense involved, and to adopt these children as wards deserving its succor.

In 1893 definite action was taken by the legislature in the appointment of an Educational board for purposes of counsel and authority in furtherance of the work. The Governor of the state as ex-officio, together with the Chief Justice were made permanent members of the board, to which were added two other persons, one seeing, the other blind.

"This Board was charged by law with the duty of inquiring into the condition of the blind children and youth of this state, and was empowered to adopt any and all measures necessary to secure for them a continuous course of instruction calculated to obtain the best results in the way of enabling them to become self-reliant and self-sustaining citizens."

The kindergarten and nursery department have been very fortunate in the character of the teachers employed. In some cases at least, these teachers have seemed to possess a genius for the patience and constancy of effort required at their hands. It should be understood that in most cases the children have to be sought out and the parents persuaded to place them in the care of the institution. Mrs. Foster says in her report for '97:

"Up to two years ago, of thirty children gathered, but two applications had been made by parents. That at least four such applications have been made during the past year, is a gratifying evidence that the work is becoming known and more appreciated. Another most natural reason why we may hope to get the children while younger is that parents are more reconciled to allowing them to attend school within the state's border. Again, we are learning of the existence of these children even while they are infants, and we can keep trace of them and look after them in *proper* time. This leads me to refer once more to the undue number of children whom we have termed "backward"—a result in almost every case of not being taken in time. Undeveloped they were, mentally and physically, untrained and helpless, muscles feeble, vitality low for want of exercise, the brain and entire nervous system either in a condition of over-excitement, or the other extreme, benumbed and dormant. The result of our work in many of these cases has gladdened our hearts and this part of our labor might well be termed "rescue work," while in several instances (although we can claim to have *helped* all) we have been forced to relinquish hope after hope as to satisfactory progress or at least results sufficient to warrant us in keeping them at the state's expense, and so have given them up."

INDUSTRIAL HOME.
(Connecticut Institute for the Blind.)

Those who have watched the industrial feature of work for the blind are more than ever earnest in their appeal for its perpetuation. Dr. E. Park Lewis, of the New York Institute for the Blind, says of this work:

"Assistance, to be effective, must be ready in two ways: It is imperative that the state should establish and maintain

industrial training schools for adults as well as for children, and the various trades should be thoroughly taught. Of the few

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whom the state has already educated, a large number have become successful in their work. But, that a much larger proportion may become so, the assistance must not cease at the critical time when the blind man starts out to face an uninformed and practically unsympathetic public, equipped to earn his own living. *This public, while it would contribute, collectively, this support, were he in a poor-house or asylum, would not, individually, know how to receive him.*

"It is at this point that French philanthropy has been more far-seeing than our own, and that chiefly through the eyes of a blind man. Maurice de la Sizeranne, appreciating the difficulties that his blind co-workers were obliged to meet, established by indefatigable effort an organization well-nigh perfect in its details, one chief function of which is to bring the educated blind in touch with those by whom their services might be required."

The fourth annual report made in 1897 gives the following statistics of the number of pupils taught.

"The number of state pupils receiving instruction during the year was sixty-

WIRE-STITCHING.

seven, being less by five than the number receiving instruction at the expense of the state during the previous year. Of these sixty-seven, nineteen were in attendance at the Perkins Institution for the Blind at South Boston, forty-eight at the Connecticut Institution, twenty-one of whom were adults and twenty-seven were children in the kindergarten department. In addition to the foregoing number of state pupils, the institution has been able to furnish profitable employment for sixteen adult blind people, seven of whom are employed as instructors in the several departments."

INSTRUCTION IN BASKET WORK.

From the beginning it has been a part of the purpose of those engaged in the work, to transfer from the primary department in Hartford, such pupils as have reached a proper stage of development, to the Perkins Institute at Boston and in this way to secure for these pupils the superior advantages of the Boston School.

"There is a beautiful story of a company of celestial beings, who in disguise, entered an ancient city upon a mission of mercy. Departing hurriedly in some way a fair young child was left behind and lost. In the morning when men came upon the streets they found a sweet

boy with sunny hair sitting upon the steps of the temple. Language had he none.

He answered questions with streaming eyes and frightened face. While men wondered, a slave drew near, carrying a harp. Then the child signaled for the instrument, for this language he could speak. He threw his arms about the harp as the child about its mother's neck."

The promoters of the work we have imperfectly outlined, have sought to furnish the blind children of our state, not with a literal harp but with that facility for self-expression which by reason of their blindness they do not possess. Has not the present measure of success more than justified their purpose? This noble work which has been so practically inaugurated deserves not alone the money of the state, but the gifts and prayers of all the humane, who are also widely thoughtful, and persistently practical. Let all its legitimate wants be cheerfully and generously supplied!

BLINDNESS.

BY ELIZABETH ALDEN CURTIS.

They walk awhile in darkness on the earth;
The matchless glory of green fields, bright skies,
And mountain brooks, veiled from their patient eyes,
And the sun, mounting in his golden mirth.

But these blind ones, since dwelling in a dearth
Of pleasant sights, the sweeter sounds and sighs
Of Nature's quiring voices yet surprise
With rarer cunning—granted them at birth.

Ah, shall not, when the sun of Judgment dips
Below the earth-line in the ominous west—
Man's vision blinded by life's fierce unrest—
Shall not the eyes chastened with long eclipse,
Be opened on the Lord's apocalypse
Clear as the poiséd eagle's on her nest.

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Rev. George M. Stone

WORK FOR THE BLIND IN CONNECTICUT.

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